

THE ONION EATER

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A 'GENERATION
OF SWINE'
COMES
INTO ITS OWN

Joe Bageant

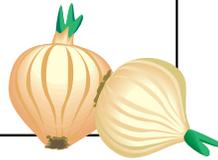


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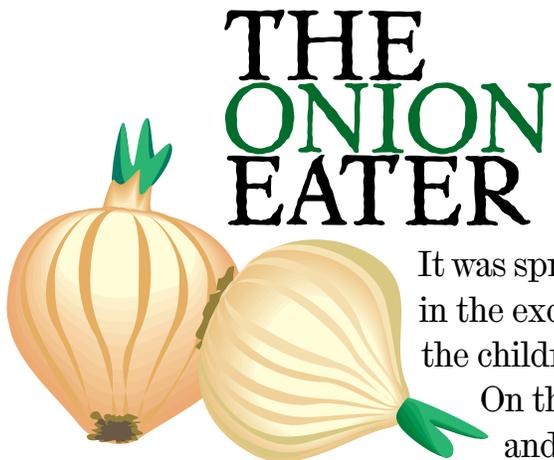
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THE ONION EATER

It was spring, 1966 and down at the end of fraternity row in the exclusive new brick high-rise apartment building, the children of the rich and the few were partying hard.

On the second floor balcony they socialized, cooked and drank beer with beautiful girls. The building even had a pool, a rare luxury in those times, and was the kind of place where only a few high-enders could afford to live while in school. That day a homeless person, an even rarer thing back then, shuffled by. Seeing them on the balcony, he asked for food. His attitude was one of a supplicant at the feet of God: “Pardon me, sirs...”

The cream of American youth was moved. They threw him a raw onion, which he ate like an apple, while they cheered and hooted and guffawed. He was sick the rest of the day. They drove their BMWs to class, and they laughed and told and retold the story.

Forty years later we see those frat boys of yesterday have come into their own, inheriting their daddies’ places in the world in the form of George Bush and his supporters.

When thoughtful Americans look at George Bush, Donald Trump – or John Kerry or Al Gore for that matter – when they hear them speak to the public, one thought comes to mind: “How inna hell do such shameless frauds, partying dolts and uninspired wonks rise to power over the rest of us? Really!

Even allowing for family money and being born at or near the top, it is hard to comprehend the ease and predictability with which they glide into power. It always reminds me of high school class reunions, where those vacuous millionaire sons of car dealers and the landed gentry give the keynote

THE ONION EATER JOE BAGEANT

address to the reunited class ... as if they had somehow made a larger contribution to the world than their classmates. As if golfing and divorcing and preening atop their sainted daddies' ever-growing hoard of capital trumps the accomplishments of ordinary folks. As if their ease is somehow more meaningful than the toil of people who drag themselves off to work every day for 30 years, let innate talents expire in order to support and educate their children properly, and daily suffer the insults of bosses, a government and a society that values them only for their purchasing power.

No such problems for the relaxed nitwit sons of the mercantile and financial classes who never had an idea in their lives.

These are the people Bush baldly and gleefully calls "my base." It figures. And sure as hell, these sons of ease will get elected and appointed to the seats of power by the very people they screw daily. They hold an unexplainable magnetism, a fatal charm for average folks. It is as if the rich have a gland in their necks that excrete the stuff. Money seems to be the pheromone of the masses, and even the most feckless sort of wealth is its own purest justification. (Sure, most of the world is that way, but they do not make such noble democratic pretensions – or enforce them globally.)

Perhaps because any of us could allegedly become wealthy according to sanctioned American mythology, we accept any and all bullshit about the supposed generosity of the rich, the Mellons, the Rockefellers and the MacArthurs and all the rest. They set up trusts to give back a tiny sliver of what they stole, usually in a rueful grab at some kind of immortality, and are hailed as great Americans.

And America's television peasantry and middle class liberals are duly impressed as they walk through Colonial Williamsburg or watch the Public television shows sponsored by such "philanthropic" foundations. The generations brutally fucked over by these dynasties are too long dead to tell the truth of the tale. And our state purchased school history books refuse to tell it. But until recently at least, Americans understood that you do not get rich by being kind and you do not expand wealth by being generous. And so, through much struggle, we established public programs to protect the weak from neglect and exploitation by the rich.

That is exactly why the cooption of social and environmental issues by the

THE ONION EATER JOE BAGEANT

party of the ultra-rich, is such an outrage. It is the ultimate perversion of, and insult to, the sacrifice of the many who came before... Franklin Roosevelt, Margaret Sanger, Jane Adams Hull, John Muir, Joe Hill, Martin Luther King... Given that even Kennedy and Clinton look like double-dealing midgets in the shadows of those giants, Bush is bound to be remembered as a heavily armed alcohol fried brat who nearly wrecked the world. Or perhaps did wreck the world. We'll see. But the frat boy president of the rich is not bothered with posterity. He is quite happy to demonstrate once again right before our eyes that his class has never done "the right thing" as a class and is never going to. So fuck you all!

The hardest job in America is to be a single mom, making \$20,000 a year.

– President George Bush

(Actual average income for a single working mom: \$11,200)

A small sampling of programs being slashed or eliminated by the Party of the Rich:

- Vocational education
- Head Start; Even Start
- Teen Drug and Alcohol Abuse
- Perkins student loan program
- Upward Bound
- Student Talent Search
- Medicaid
- Doctor training programs for children's hospitals
- Spinal cord injury treatment and rehabilitation programs
- Low income community housing
- Low income energy assistance
- Single mothers housing; Section eight voucher program
- Housing assistance for AIDS
- Housing assistance for native Americans
- Housing assistance for disabled Americans
- Job training for farm workers
- Nitration programs for children of migrant farm workers

THE ONION EATER JOE BAGEANT

- Nutrition programs for single mothers
- The Community Food and Nutrition program;
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Land restoration funds
- The Superfund
- Mining Waste Cleanup
- Department of the Interior natural lands management
- Bureau of Indian Affairs
- Department of Energy nuclear waste cleanup
- Amtrak rails service (in the states that did not vote for George Bush)
- Veterans health maintenance programs
- Disabled veterans programs
- Veterans nursing home program
- Women, Infants and Children nutrition program (WIC)
- Temporary Aid to Needy Families, (TANF)

In a new twist on things profitable, the dysfunctional Bush crew (in a strategy doubtlessly hatched within the poison sacks of that plump little toad of darkness, Karl Rove) has commandeered justice and charity in the name of – of all people – Jesus. They want to take over social programs and run the world, throwing public billions toward the squalor so they can run in and extract profit from misery. That is the amazing thing about capitalist ass-holery. No horrible behavior is too embarrassing. And even as they dismantle the machinery of societal kindness, they blame the wreckage they inflict and the theft of our children’s future on “liberals.” That would be brilliant were it not so perverse.

Yes, it was the meanest of a mean seed that spawned this craven, exploitative, war-making, manifestation of European man called the American. I say European because, let’s face it, the white owning classes still manage to hold the heads of blacks, Latinos and most other ethnic groups except Jews face down in the toilet. Ours was a seed fertilized by the jism of demons, not angels. Consequently, cruelty comes too easily to us, compassion too hard. We recognize this in ourselves, which is why we can see it in the rich. Hopefully we can also hear the voice of grace that exists within us, right

THE ONION EATER JOE BAGEANT

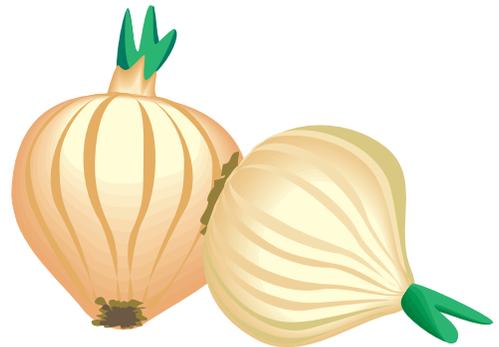
alongside our meanness. It is hard to hear anything however, with the fucking round-the-clock commercials and patriotic music turned up LOUD and all those bombers rumbling overhead on their way to Iraq.

There are at least four million homeless souls plying our streets and roads and alleyways. The administration admits to that many, so the number is probably higher. Four million onion eaters. Or maybe 35 million. In the United States, there are 34.9 million people who go hungry or are food insecure, an increase of 3.9 million people since 1999. 12.9 million of these are children. What this says is: not only has our government failed, but also that you and I have failed. Unless we are like the Republicans (who have declared time and again that there is no reason whatsoever why they should be their brother's keeper) we must call it our own personal failure as humans. Now is the time to grab onto the right place in ourselves, from which we can restore to the onion-eater his stolen dignity. Allow the onion-eater supplicants ("Pardon us, sirs...") to count for something in the halls of power. (Halls of power? Hell, they'd be happy to count for something on a goddamned city bus.) Do it for Buddha, for Jesus, for Karl Marx or for Roshi Bobbi ...for Mullah Nesruddin and for the family living in a cardboard box in San Paolo, Brazil or Maputo, Mozambique.

One thing is certain. If we continue to let rich and their lackeys in financial institutions, media, and government keep us paralyzed out of fear that we will lose something – a job, a home, whatever – then we liberals, we men and women of good will in this country, will stay whipped. If we do not stand up soon, immediately really, then it is over, this whole allegedly grand experiment in dignity and equality. If it is not already.

Meanwhile, take a couple of steps back. Now if you will look upward toward the balcony, you can see him – George Bush in front of his crowd, sneering over the edge and holding an onion.

Special thanks to Bob Delay, a renunciate and seeker living in Etowah, Tennessee. Joe Bageant is a writer and magazine editor living in Winchester, Virginia. He may be contacted at bageantjb@netscape.net.



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